Birthday Wishes

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Birthday Wishes

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Summary

Several months after her mother's death, it's time for Gene's birthday. Hannibal and Cassie take her on a picnic.

Notes

This was written for a class assignment, so it was made to be accessible to people who haven't seen the show. Still, it's probably best if you read the rest of the series first.

Thanks to my darling friend inimitability for proofing this for me.

Gene never knew things could be like this.

She's only twelve. This time last year, she'd been living with her mother. Now her mother has been in the ground three months, and yet somehow, she's the happiest she's ever been. She has a vague feeling she should be sad about that. (She isn't.)

She's sitting on a blanket at the park, the sun's warmth on her back, surrounded by her new family. Well, part of her new family; Abigail and Will are still out of town, but Papa and Cassie are here. Papa pulls a cake out of the picnic basket and she laughs, delighted, as she wonders how he managed to get it in there without smearing the frosting. There are no candles- Gene *hates* candles, the feel of the softening wax and the chemical smell of the smoke- but her name is written on the top in something that vaguely resembles her sister's handwriting. *Gene*, it says, not Iphigenia, because Cassie knows she hates that name and never calls her by it.

(She still can't hear the name 'Iphigenia' without hearing it in her mother's voice. She's glad the cake doesn't say that, now.)

"Make a wish, Gene," Cassie encourages her.

Gene looks up at her older sister with a huff of laughter, brushing a few strands of hair out of her eyes. Absentmindedly, she thinks that she should get a haircut soon. That can wait, though; for now, there is cake.

"How can I make a wish if there's no candles?" Gene questions logically.

"You don't need candles to make a wish, silly," Cassie teases her. "Just close your eyes and think of a wish."

Gene reaches for her sister's hand and gives it a squeeze. Cassie squeezes it back, and only then does Gene close her eyes. She wishes for things to just stay like *this*, forever, that nothing will have to change. She's only known Papa for a handful of months, lived with him

for less than that, but things are so much better here than they ever were with her mother. She knows Cassie is leaving for college in the fall and things will have to change, but that doesn't stop her from wishing.

(Will they let her stay with Papa once Cassie has gone away? Her older sister is her guardian, now, on paper. Will they send her back to live with her birth father? He and her mother were still technically together when she died, even though he was almost never home. Does that mean-?) No. She won't overthink this.

When she opens her eyes, Papa gives her a warm smile and pulls out a knife to cut the cake.

"It's strawberry," Gene observes, watching as he slides the first slice onto a paper plate. It's not the obnoxious pink that she's used to for strawberry flavorings, but it's a warmer shade of beige than vanilla and she can see chunks of red fruit buried in the filling.

"Your favorite," Papa tells her with a smile.

There are only the three of them out there. It's a beautiful day out, just warm enough not to need a jacket. The sky is a bright, crisp cerulean blue, streaked with only a few thin, barely-there clouds. A light breeze ruffles the sleeves of her dress as Papa passes her the first slice of cake. There are only a few other people in the park, far enough away that Gene doesn't feel crowded. In short, it's the perfect day for a picnic.

"Will and Abigail's flight should land in a few hours," Papa says as he cuts another slice. "I've promised to pick them up at the airport."

"Too bad it got delayed in the first place," Cassie sighs in response. "She would've liked to be here for the presents. Unless you wanted to wait?"

It takes Gene a moment to realize that the question is directed at her. She considers it. On one hand, she would love for Will and Abigail to be here when she opens her presents. Abigail is Papa's daughter too and Gene thinks of her as another sister, even though they only met a few months ago. (She's pretty sure Abigail isn't Papa's birth daughter, either. She's

pretty sure Abigail got here the same way Gene did, with a dead parent and no place to go.) On the other hand, Gene *really* wants to open her presents.

She shakes her head. It's not *her* fault Abigail's flight from Paris was delayed.

"I figured you'd say that," Cassie tells her with a smile. "We'll open them when we get home, then."

Papa passes Cassie the next slice of cake and she fumbles as she takes the plate from his hand. There's a moment where Gene thinks it's going to fall, but Cassie's other hand shoots out and she balances it just in time. "Shut up," she mumbles in response to Papa's teasing look. Gene grins and leans in closer to her sister, picking up a fork and examines her slice of cake.

It smells heavenly. This close, Gene can see the individual seeds on the strawberries and the glistening drops of condensation clinging to the icing. There is a small patch that looks like it didn't get mixed in properly- Papa is a chef, not a baker- but it's perfect.

She takes a small, tentative bite and her eyes flutter shut, fingers drumming on the ground as she tastes it. When she opens her eyes, Papa and Cassie are watching her, waiting for her verdict. She grins and wraps her arms around Cassie's torso. Her mouth is not cooperating to form words but hopefully she gets the point across anyway.

"You like it?" Papa asks her, his voice warm, and she nods shyly.

"Happy birthday, Gene," Cassie tells her.

It takes a while to finish their slices of cake. Papa and Cassie keep up a conversation to which Gene listens but does not contribute. She just sits close to her sister and plays with Cassie's hair. It used to be all black, but she hasn't dyed it in a while so the first few inches are visibly brown; the mixing of the two colors is very interesting to look at, in Gene's opinion. She rubs a few strands of hair back and forth between her finger and thumb. The repetitive movement is grounding, comforting, and she's glad Cassie lets her do it.

After a while, the conversation begins to wind down. "You having a good time?" Cassie asks her teasingly.

Gene grins at her. Cassie laughs and ruffles her hair, causing Gene to duck her head and drop the strands of Cassie's hair that she'd been playing with.

(Gene remembers that moment, just a few short months ago, when the police came to tell them about their mother's death. They asked so many questions. *We were at Doctor Lecter's house,* Gene told them. *He was with us the whole night*. Gene, as a general rule, doesn't like lying; still, she never once regretted lying that day.)

Cassie starts to clean up, stacking the plates and putting them to the side. Gene almost thinks they're getting ready to go, but then Papa pulls a present out of the picnic basket, and she sits up straighter. She'd thought they'd left the presents at home. She isn't sure what to expect; presents from her mother were always pretty but functionally useless, or else completely outside of Gene's interests, but Abigail has assured her that this year will be better. It certainly has been so far.

This present is wide but thin, covered in a purple floral wrapping paper that she already knows will be thick and luxurious. She's not quite sure what could be inside. It's too thin to be a book, but maybe…

"We have more presents at home," Papa tells her, as though reading her mind. "But this one is special and I wanted to give it to you first."

Her breath catches in her throat as she takes the package. It's lighter than she'd expected. She peels up the tape and unfolds the wrapping paper carefully. The stack of paper inside is crisp and white. *Baltimore County Certification of Adoption*, the top sheet reads in bold black font.

Gene can feel moisture gathering in her eyes as she realizes what she's looking at. She drops the package onto the picnic blanket and flings herself at Papa. *Thank you,* she thinks. *Thank you thank you thankyouthankyouthankyou*. It's a good surprise but she's overwhelmed anyway.

“I hope those are happy tears?” Papa asks, holding her tightly in his arms. Gene nods furiously.

I love you, she thinks as hard as she can. From the way he squeezes her just a little bit tighter, she almost thinks he can hear her.

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